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ERTRAM WOLFE

MARX AND AMERICA

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No. 38 • The JOHN DAY Pamphlets • 25c

25 cents

THE JOHN DAY *PAMPHLETS*—No. 38

MARX AND AMERICA

by

BERTRAM WOLFE

"THE predictions of Marx and Engels, although with retarded tempo, have all been verified. Industrialization has indeed taken place 'with seven-league boots'; slavery has been abolished; class fluidity has come to an end; the frontier has disappeared; the split between skilled and unskilled, native and foreign, negro and white, is yielding to growing homogeneity; America has ceased to be the 'promised land' for the immigrant; negroes and working farmers are being radicalized and are developing a feeling for the need of alliance with the workers against the 'associated oligarchy of capital'; the Pacific has come to play its prophesied role; America has attained to stormy and contested world hegemony, and a permanent working class has been formed.

"Only the subjective factors are still lagging—in short a Marxist Communist Party worthy of the name. To create these subjective conditions the absorption of the writings of Marx and Engels on America, the developing of their fragmentary hints (fragments of a gigantic structure), the mastery of their method, are an essential aid. Marxists in America can make no more fitting observation of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Marx than by possessing themselves of that revolutionary heritage and making it their own—their own, and the heritage of the American working class as a whole."

* * *

See back cover for other
JOHN DAY PAMPHLETS

THE JOHN DAY COMPANY, Inc.
386 Fourth Avenue, New York

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THE JOHN DAY COMPANY

New York

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FOR THE JOHN DAY COMPANY, INC.
BY THE STRATFORD PRESS, INC., NEW YORK

I

The "Discovery" of America

To tell the truth, the Germans have not been able to use their theory (*Marxism*—B.D.W.) as a lever to set the American masses in motion. To a great extent they do not understand the theory themselves and treat it in a doctrinaire and dogmatic fashion as if it were something which must be committed to memory, and which then suffices for all purposes without further ado. For them it is a credo, not a guide for action.

So wrote Engels to Sorge in 1886, indignant at the mechanical and doctrinaire fashion in which the German "Marxist" immigrants were transplanting to America the formulae and methods appropriate to the German working class.

Marxism, as the theory and practice of the class struggle, has nothing in common with sectarianism. It is no dogma but a guide to action. It envisages not the logic-chopping, creed-reciting and conceit of sterile sects, but the action of great masses, of an entire class and its allies. The interests of the masses are its starting point; the action of masses its driving force, and indissoluble connection with the masses is the condition of its growth and the law of its being. "Theory becomes a material force as soon as it takes possession of the masses." Such is Marx's own conception of the Marxian theory.

Marx and "Exceptionalism"

Why did the American "Marxists" of German origin fail to influence and lead the young American working class just beginning to feel its power and to organize on a national scale in the last quarter of the 19th century? Primarily because they failed utterly to make a realistic analysis of American conditions, of the specific national characteristics and pecu-

liarities of the country in which they sought to give their correct general theory concrete application. They never even raised the question of "American peculiarities," except in the sense of abusing and condemning the American working class whose movement they were seeking to fashion and lead. Yet, the general theory of Marxism is the result of vast powers of generalization distilled from the investigation of concrete reality and becomes a guide to action only in so far as it is concretely applied to concrete situations realistically grasped and analyzed. The strategy and tactics of class war, like strategy and tactics generally, require not only a training in "military science" or theory, but also a detailed knowledge of the terrain in which it is to be applied and the forces with which it works and with which it has to contend.

This requires in the first place, an analysis of the special development and peculiar features of American capitalism, and in this sense, except for fragmentary hints from the pens of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and partial beginnings made recently by certain American Marxians, the development of "American Marxism" (in the sense of the application of Marxian theory to the analysis of American conditions) has scarcely begun. In fact, the official theoreticians of American communism do not at present seem to grasp the necessity for such an analysis, and condemn the very planting of the problem as "American exceptionalism." Yet this so-called "exceptionalism" is of the essence of Marxism and the "arch-exceptionalist" is none other than Marx himself.

This (the uniformity of a general development which Marx has just discussed—B.D.W.) does not prevent the same economic basis from showing infinite variations and gradations in its appearance, even though its principal conditions are everywhere the same. This is due to innumerable outside circumstances, natural environment, race peculiarities, outside historical influences and so forth, all of which must be ascertained by careful analysis. (*Capital,* Vol. III, p. 919.)

And again:

This is not enough for my critics; they are pleased to trans-

form my historical sketch of the origin of capitalism in Western Europe into a general historical-philosophical theory, claiming to prescribe an unchangeable course of development for all peoples without any consideration for the special conditions of their historical existence. (Letter to Michailovsky.)

There are no major writings of Marx dealing specifically with America. He was primarily absorbed in the centers of European revolutionary development in his time, Germany and France; and for an analysis of capitalism in its "pure" (i.e. most developed and therefore most revealing) form, his laboratory was England. His interest in America, especially prior to the Civil War, was primarily an interest in the effect of American events upon European development, and it was only after the removal of the first International to America and the development of the strike waves of the late '80's and '90's that there are any recommendations on tactical questions of the American movement from the pens of Marx and Engels.

Early Period: International Rôle of America

When, in January 1848, the Manifesto (*Communist Manifesto*—B.D.W.) made its first appearance in the world, the proletarian movement was confined to a limited field of operations. This is plainly shown in the last section, which is entitled: Attitude of the Communists towards the various Opposition Parties. There is no mention either of Russia or of the United States in the section—noteworthy omissions. At the time when the Manifesto was composed, Russia constituted the last great bulwark of European reaction, and the United States absorbed, in the form of countless emigrants, the surplus of the European proletariat. Both countries provided Western Europe with raw materials, and simultaneously, both countries served as markets for the sale of European manufactured goods. Both, therefore, in one way or another, were pillars of the European social order.

What a change has taken place since then! European emigration has promoted the unprecedented growth of agriculture in North America, which in its turn, by becoming a competitor of European agriculture, has shaken the landed interests of

Europe (great and small alike) to their very foundations. Again the development of farming in the United States has made it possible to exploit the vast industrial resources of the country so effectively that, before long, American competition will put an end to the monopoly hitherto exercised by Western Europe in the realm of industry. These two courses of evolution react in their turn upon the United States, tending to force that country likewise into revolutionary paths. More and more do the small and medium-sized farms, the warp and woof of the whole political system, tend to be submerged by the competition of large-scale undertakings. Simultaneously in the field of industry, we are witnessing the emergence of a multitudinous proletariat and a fabulous concentration of capital. (Preface of Marx and Engels to Russian Edition of the *Communist Manifesto,* published in Geneva, 1872.)

Such, in brief, was the estimate of Marx and Engels on the international rôle of the United States as a "safety valve" and source of cotton and grain for European capitalism prior to the American Civil War, and as itself a revolutionizing force during and after the Civil War.

The Communist Manifesto with its brilliant tracing of the entire trajectory which European capitalism and the proletarian revolution were to follow, undoubtedly overestimated the speed with which the path was to be covered. The explanation of the slower tempo of the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions is to be found principally in four factors:

1. The petty-bourgeoisie was incredibly more cowardly and less consistently revolutionary than the authors of the Manifesto could imagine prior to 1848, having in mind the "heroic days" of the bourgeoisie during the great French Revolution.
2. Russia proved a powerful bulwark of reaction.
3. America served as a "safety valve" for discontented emigrants and a market for capitalist expansion.
4. There was a flood of gold from and a rush of emigration to America in 1849 consequent on the California gold strike.

In 1850 Marx wrote:

Now we come to America. The most important fact which has taken place here, even more important than the February revolution, is the discovery of the California gold mines. Even now, after scarcely eighteen months, it can be foreseen that this discovery will have much more magnificent results than the discovery of America itself. . . . A coast of 30 degrees of latitude in length, one of the most beautiful and fruitful in the world, till now as good as uninhabited, changes before our eyes into a rich, civilized land, thickly populated by men of all races from the Yankee to the Chinese, from the Negro to the Indian and Malayan, from the Creole and Mestizo to the European. The gold of California pours out in streams over America and the Asiatic coast of the Pacific Ocean, and drags the most recalcitrant barbarian peoples into world trade, into civilization. For the second time world trade takes a new direction. What Tyre, Carthage and Alexandria were in antiquity, what Genoa and Venice were to the Middle Ages, what London and Liverpool have been till now, the emporia of world trade, New York and San Francisco, San Juan de Nicaragua and Leon, Chagres and Panama will now become. . . . Thanks to the gold of California and the tireless energy of the Yankees, both coasts of the Pacific Ocean will soon be just as populous, just as open to trade, just as industrial as is now the coast from Boston to New Orleans. Then the Pacific Ocean will play the same rôle as the Atlantic does now and as the Mediterranean did in antiquity and the Middle Ages—the rôle of the great seaway of world commerce; and the Atlantic Ocean will sink to the rôle of an inland sea as the Mediterranean is now. . . . (*Neue Rheinische Revue,* Correspondence dated London, Jan. 31, 1850.)

The words just quoted are a striking example of "that wonderful gift, first demonstrated in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* of clearly grasping the character, the significance and the necessary results of great historical events at the time that these events are still being enacted before our eyes or have just come to an end." (Engels.)

The brilliant prophecy of the shift of the center of world trade to America and the Pacific concludes with a forecast of the revolutionizing of China and the playful prediction that

when the European reactionaries flee to Asia from the rising tide of revolution in Europe to the ancient Great Wall, they will find over its gate the inscription:

"Republique chinoise, Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité."

One more example of "prophecy" concerning America's international rôle, this time from the pen of Engels. In 1888 he wrote to Sorge of the danger of a general European war in which "ten to fifteen million combatants" would take part:

> If the war were fought to a finish without inner movements (i.e. revolutions—B.D.W.), a state of exhaustion would result such as Europe has not experienced for two hundred years. American industry would then win all along the line and would set us all before the alternative: either a relapse to pure agriculture for our own needs (American grain forbids any other kind), or—social revolution. (Letter to Sorge, Jan. 7, 1888.)

II

The Civil War

"Liberal" historians, whose main stock in trade is the conviction that all progress is gradual and "force never accomplished anything," pontifically declare that "the Civil War was unnecessary" and "slavery was doomed anyhow." This owllike "wisdom" which takes flight only after the day is done is refuted by the decades of conflict which preceded and the decades of conflict which followed the Civil War. For almost half a century the struggle between North and South was the axis around which turned the whole domestic and foreign history of America.

> The present struggle between the South and North [wrote Marx in 1861] is . . . nothing but a struggle between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labor. Because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side by side on the North American continent, the struggle has broken out. It can only be ended by the victory of the one or the other system. (*Vienna Presse,* Nov. 7, 1861.)

In an earlier article in the same paper, Marx had exploded the myths of the reactionary European press (still held by some of our "liberal" historians) that the Civil War was occasioned by the struggle over the tariff. In reply Marx pointed out that free trade had prevailed from 1846 to 1861 and that the Morrill Tariff, far from causing secession, was only possible because secession had taken place. (*Ibid.,* Oct. 25, 1861.)

A second myth, advanced by the reactionary press then and held by many "liberal" historians today, was to the effect that slavery was not involved, merely the preservation of the Union and Northern reconquest.

> Before all [answered Marx] it must be remembered that the war did not emanate from the North but from the South. (*Ibid.*)

The South split the Democratic Party on the Kansas issue because even "Squatter Sovereignty" was not a sufficient expansion policy for the slaveholders. The consequent election of Lincoln furnished the pretext for secession and the South attacked Fort Sumter to force war, after learning that the garrison would surrender within three days without attack. "Continual expansion of the territory and continual spreading of slavery over and beyond its old boundaries is a life principle for the slave States of the Union." (*Ibid.*) In this "life principle" Marx found the driving force which made the conflict "irrepressible."

The cultivation of southern articles of exportation carried on by slaves [he continued] . . . is productive only as long as it is carried out on a mass scale with large gangs of slaves and on wide stretches of a naturally fertile soil demanding only simple labor. (*Ibid.*)

Exhaustion rapidly results and the older States are forced more and more to slave-breeding.

As soon as this point comes, the acquisition of new territories becomes necessary in order that a part of the slaveholders may settle new fertile territories with their slaves and that a new market for slave-breeding and the sale of slaves may be created for the part that has remained behind.

Thus, it was the conflict between two opposing and *expanding* systems—a conflict "to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or prostituted to the tramp of the slaveowners"—that brought on the Civil War.

The Conduct of the War

The great struggle went through many stages before it finally climaxed into war. Until its very last phase, the *objective* significance of the movement—the eradication of slavery—remained quite outside the historical field of vision of the Northern bourgeoisie as a whole, although it was far more

obvious to the Southern slaveowners. The class *as a class* trod the path of revolution with the hesitating steps of petty compromise and political bargaining. (Herberg, *The Heritage of the Civil War,* Workers Age Publishing Co.)

Only the advance guard of the bourgeoisie, the abolitionists and radical wing of the Republican Party, and the vanguard of the European working class on the one hand, and the Southern ruling class on the other, clearly perceived the revolutionary character of the conflict.

When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe for the first time in the annals of the world "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, when on the very spot where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the Rights of Man was issued (Declaration of Independence—B.D.W.), and the first impulse given to the European Revolution of the eighteenth century, when on those very spots counter-revolution, with systematic thoroughness, gloried in rescinding "the ideas entertained at the time of the formation of the old constitution" and maintained "slavery to be a beneficial institution," indeed, the only solution of the great problem of the "relation of capital to labor," and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice," —then the working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes (of Europe—B.D.W.), for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor, and that for the men of labor with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests are at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic.

So wrote Marx in the Address of the First International to Lincoln, characterizing the revolution, or rather counter-revolution, initiated by the Southern ruling class. Similarly, in a letter to Engels he analyzed the engineering of the secession and the nature of the new government set up:

A closer view of the history of the secessionist movement

shows that secession, constitution (Montgomery), Congress, etc., were all usurpations. Nowhere did they allow the people to vote en masse. . . . It is not only a question of secession from the North, but also of the fortifying and sharpening of the oligarchy of 300,000 slavelords in the South against the five million whites. (Letter of July 1, 1861.)

Both Marx and Engels expected that once war was declared the North would wage it by revolutionary means, that is, proclaim the emancipation of the slaves, encourage a slave revolt, and thus utilize the inherent weakness in the Southern social structure to bring the war to a speedy conclusion. But Lincoln, temperamentally cautious and influenced by the pressure of the border States which had not seceded, disappointed not only the "revolutionary impatience" of Marx and Engels but of Greeley, Stevens, Fremont and many another radical Republican and abolitionist as well. Thaddeus Stevens declared:

Our statesmen do not seem to know how to touch the hearts of freemen and rouse them to battle. No sound of universal liberty has gone forth from the Capitol. Our generals have a sword in one hand and shackles in the other. Let it be known that this government is fighting to carry out the great principles of the Declaration of Independence and the blood of every freeman would boil with enthusiasm and his nerves be strengthened for the holy warfare. Give him the sword in one hand and the book of freedom in the other, and he will soon sweep despotism from every corner of this continent.

Greeley wrote:

Future generations will with difficulty realize that there could have been hesitation on this point.

Marx tartly commented:

Lincoln's acts have all the appearance of the pettifogging, stipulated clauses which an attorney presents to his opponent.

But in the next line he added, and this is a lesson to the "debunking" school of historians:

this does not interfere with their historical content. . . . (Letter to Engels, Oct. 29, 1862.)

Engels was so infuriated and worried by the military-political blunders and defeats of the North in the early period of the war that he feared the defeat of the North in spite of its numerical and potentially political superiority. Marx knew less of military matters than Engels, but with sure analysis of the political forces involved, never doubted that emancipation would come, and ultimately the victory of the North. He wrote Engels:

The way in which the North wages war is just what you would expect of a bourgeois republic where swindle has so long sat upon the throne.

And again, in the same letter:

As far as the Yankees are concerned, I am firmly of the opinion, now as I was before, that the North will win in the end. Of course, the Civil War can go through all kinds of phases, perhaps even armistices, and may drag out for a long time. . . .

In spite of everything I would stake my head on it that these fellows (the South—B.D.W.) will get the worst of it. . . . (Letter of Sept. 10, 1862.)

But Marx did not limit himself to analysis and prophecy. He worked tirelessly to arouse the workingmen of Europe, and especially those of England, to the support of the Northern cause and the prevention of a war by the ruling class of England or any other country against the Union. He wrote articles in the English and German press, urged mass meetings and demonstrations on the British trade-union leaders, and one of the first acts of the newly-formed International Workingmen's Association (founded Sept. 28, 1864) was to adopt the address to Lincoln, cited above, and to arrange an international campaign of meetings and demonstrations.

Lincoln gratefully acknowledged to the workingmen of Manchester, starving because of the cotton blockade, that their support was "an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country."

The United States Senate paid tribute to the same heroism in its sessions of Feb. 26 and March 2, 1863, and even the conservative Charles Francis Adams, Ambassador to England, made grudging acknowledgment of gratitude to the First International. Of this debt of gratitude to the workingmen of England and the International not a word has survived in the writings of our present-day official historians!

The Reconstruction Period

In a second address of the International Workingmen's Association directed to President Johnson on the occasion of the assassination of Lincoln and the wounding of Seward, the International tactfully suggested its views on reconstruction in the words:

. . . the task, Sir, devolves upon you to uproot by law what the sword has felled. . . . (Address of May 13, 1865.)

And in a third address— "To the People of the United States," on the occasion of the ending of the war, the International, after offering its congratulations and recalling its support as giving it the right to offer advice, declares:

. . . Permit us to add a word of counsel for the future.

Injustice against a fraction of your people having been followed by such dire consequences, put an end to it. Declare your fellow citizens from this day forth free and equal without any reserve. If you refuse them citizens' rights while you exact from them citizens' duties, you will sooner or later face a new struggle which will once more drench your country in blood. (Address of Sept. 25, 1865.)

Just as Marx had advocated a prosecution of the war by revolutionary means, so he saw the necessity for continuing the

social revolution initiated by the Civil War, by means of a "Jacobin" rather than a "Girondin" reconstruction program. This would have involved the smashing of the Southern ruling class, breaking up of their estates, distribution of the land to those who tilled it, the emancipated slaves and poor whites, and full social, economic and political equality for the negroes. This program was urged with varying degrees of completeness and clarity by the radical Republicans—Stevens, Wade, Sumner and Phillips. But against this radical course, needed to carry through the bourgeois-democratic revolution involved in the Civil War to its ultimate conclusions, the reactionary wing of the Republican Party, backed by the big bourgeoisie, supported the conservative program outlined by Lincoln and Johnson. Marx was swift to see this and as early as June 24, 1865, he wrote to Engels:

Johnson's policy disturbs me. Ridiculous affectation of severity against individual persons, up to now highly vacillating and weak in the thing itself. The reaction has already begun in America and will soon be strengthened if this spinelessness is not put an end to. (Letter of June 24, 1865.)

The following year he saw a gleam of hope in the struggle of the Radicals for the control of Congress and their attempt to impeach Johnson, an attempt which came very close to success.

After the phase of Civil War the United States is really only now entering into the revolutionary phase, and the European wiseacres, who believe in the omnipotence of Mr. Johnson will soon be undeceived. (Letter to Engels, April 23, 1866.)

Vain hope! The conservative course triumphed and eleven years later Marx summed up the results of reconstruction in another letter to Engels:

The policy of the new President (Hayes) will make the negroes, and the great expropriations of land in favor of the railways, mining companies, etc. . . . will make the farmers, already dissatisfied, into allies of the working class.

III

The American Labor Movement

No permanent labor movement was formed in America until after the Civil War. The various workingmen's parties that flourished for brief intervals prior to that were diverted into popular reform movements for universal suffrage and free public education, into agrarian movements for free distribution of small homesteads from the public lands, into the Utopian socialist experiments under petty-bourgeois leadership during the '30's and '40's, and the antislavery agitation that overwhelmed all other issues in the decade or so prior to the Civil War. But the war brought in its train the rapid distribution of public lands (whole empires to the railroads and homesteads to small farmers and workingmen), the abolition of slavery and the sudden and swift development of great fortunes, a dominant industrial and financial class, and, within a few decades trustified industry.

The National Labor Union

In the United States of America, any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new and vigorous life sprang. The first fruit of the Civil War was an agitation for the 8-hour day—a movement which ran with express speed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California. (Marx, *Capital,* Vol. I, p. 309—published in 1867.)

In August, 1866, the National Labor Union was formed under the leadership of William H. Sylvis, leader and founder of the National Iron Molders Union. One of the acts of the formative convention of the National Labor Union was the proclamation of a fight for the 8-hour day as a first step in

Sylvis

a struggle "to free the labor of this country from capitalistic slavery."

As president of the National Labor Union, Sylvis answered an address of the First International to the American people in the following terms:

We have a common cause. It is the war of poverty against wealth. . . . In the name of the workingmen of the United States I extend to you . . . the right hand of fellowship. Continue in the good work that you have undertaken until a glorious success shall crown your efforts! Such is our resolve. Our recent war has led to the foundation of the most infamous money aristocracy of the earth. . . . We have declared war against it and we are determined to conquer—by means of the ballot, if possible—if not, we shall resort to more serious means. A little blood-letting is necessary in desperate cases.

Such was the spirit of the outstanding leader of the new movement that had set in motion a wave of eight-hour strikes all over the country. The same leader had declared in a speech to a workers' meeting in Sunbury, Pa., a year earlier (1868):

No man in America rejoiced more than I at the downfall of negro slavery. But when the shackles fell from the limbs of those four millions of blacks, it did not make them free men; it simply transferred them from one condition of slavery to another. . . . We are now all one family of slaves together, and the labor reform movement is a second emancipation proclamation.

Marx explained this new spirit in terms of the fact that immigration was now depositing workers in the industrial centers faster than the Western lands could drain them off, that the American Civil War had left behind it a colossal debt and taxation burden and had created "a financial aristocracy of the meanest kind," and that the public lands were being gobbled up by speculators and railway and mining companies at a headlong pace. "No longer is the Great Republic the promised land for emigrants" (*Capital,* Vol. I, pp. 857-8).

The National Labor Union, after a meteoric rise, was weakened by the untimely death of Sylvis, absorbed as a political movement into the Greenback-Populist tendency and crushed as a union organization during the depression of 1873. But before the prolonged depression was at an end the labor movement recovered and began a new series of struggles in 1877. A general railway strike tied up the Baltimore & Ohio and Pennsylvania Railways and spread to the other lines and even to other industries such as the coal mines. For the first time the Federal troops were called out in time of peace to break a strike. The militia was called out in Maryland, Pennsylvania and other States, and in some cases proved "unreliable," that is, fraternized with the strikers. It was this experience which caused the terrified ruling class to reorganize the militia on the basis of class differentiation (the formation of the "Diamond" 7th Regiment dates from this event) and construct numerous strong armories—forts for civil warfare —in the industrial centers. Marx wrote to Engels in July, 1877:

What do you think of the workers of the United States? This first explosion against the associated oligarchy of capital, which has arisen since the Civil War, will naturally again be suppressed, but can very well form the point of origin for the constitution of an earnest workers' party. The policy of the new president will make the negroes, and the great expropriations of land . . . will make the farmers of the West, who are already very dissatisfied, allies of the workers.

Noteworthy in this letter are the insistence on the need for "the constitution of an earnest workers' party" and the possibility of an alliance of the working class with the poor farmers and the negroes. To these and related questions, Engels returned again and again in the letters of the next decade addressed to German Marxist immigrants in America. They formed the center around which the tactical problems of the American Marxists revolved, and still revolve today.

"Contempt for Theory"

Although America is the land of most advanced capitalist industry, the American working class, measured in terms of organization and political (i.e. class) consciousness and ideology, is one of the most backward in the capitalist world. It is predominantly bourgeois-minded, theoretically backward and even dominated by a contempt for theory which makes the development of a revolutionary movement based upon revolutionary theory so much the more difficult.

Engels wrote to Sorge on Dec. 31, 1892:

Here in old Europe, things are livelier than in your "youthful" land, which still doesn't seem to want to outgrow its fledgling years. It is noteworthy, but quite natural in a young land, which has never known feudalism and has grown up from the beginning on a bourgeois foundation, that bourgeois prejudices should be so firmly planted in the working class. . . . The American working class imagines that the traditionally inherited bourgeois society is something progressive and superior by its very nature and for all epochs, a non plus ultra. . . . The Americans can struggle and squirm as they will, they cannot discount their surely gigantic future like a bill of exchange; they will have to wait for its due date and precisely because its future is so great, its present must occupy itself principally with the preliminary work for the future, and this work is, as in every young land, predominantly material and determines a certain backwardness of thought, a clinging to the traditions connected with the founding of the new nationality. . . .

The roots of American "contempt for theory" lie in the fact that the theories imported from Europe, and distilled from European practice and experience were hopelessly at variance with the practical conditions of this new country, with such different (colonial and pioneer) conditions and such vast extents of free land. Therefore, the gulf between theory and practice, so characteristic of bourgeois thought, is enormously widened in America.

In any land, the masses learn not so much from theory as from experience, and it is the task of the theoretically developed Marxist to further such experience and drive home his theories on the basis of it. But in America and England (England's "contempt for theory" has a somewhat different basis, the fact that it was the first capitalist country and could not learn from the concentrated experience, or theory, of any other land), in England and America, Marx and Engels emphasized, it was especially necessary to realize that the masses could not learn by mere preaching at them from outside their ranks.

On Sept. 16, 1886, Engels wrote to Sorge:

In a country as elemental as America, which has developed in a purely bourgeois fashion without any feudal past, but has taken over from England a mass of ideology surviving from the feudal period, such as English common law, religion and sectarianism, and in which the necessity of practical work and of the concentration of capital, has produced a general contempt for all theories, which is only now beginning to disappear in educated and scientific circles—in such a country the people must come to realize their own social interests by making mistake after mistake. Nor will the workers be spared that; the confusion of trade-unions, socialists, Knights of Labor, etc., will continue for some time to come, and they will only learn by injuring themselves. But the chief thing is that they have been set in motion. . . .

Class Stratification

One of the principal obstacles to the formation of a unified working class is the division into skilled and unskilled. In America this has been enormously intensified by the fact that it tended to coincide with the division into native and foreign born.

It appears to me that your great obstacle in America is the privileged position of the native-born worker. Until 1848, a native-born, permanent working class was the exception rather than the rule. The scattered beginnings of the latter in the East and in the cities could still hope to become farmers

or members of the bourgeoisie. Such a class has now developed and has organized itself to a large degree in trade-unions. But it still assumes an aristocratic position, and leaves (as it may) the ordinary, poorly-paid trades to the immigrants, of whom only a small percentage enter the aristocratic trade-unions. These immigrants are, however, divided into nationalities, which do not understand one another, and for the most part do not understand the language of the country. And your bourgeoisie understands even better than the Austrian government, how to play off one nationality against another. . . . (Engels' letter to Schlueter, March 30, 1892.)

Hence Engels insisted on the superior importance of "a real mass movement amongst the English-speaking population," regardless of its elementary character at the beginning, to the formation of a theoretically correct advanced party consisting largely of immigrants. Not that the higher experience, more developed theory and revolutionary traditions of the immigrants were worthless. Quite the contrary, if they did not separate themselves from the native movement, they might serve the vital rôle of

a nucleus which retains theoretical insight into the nature and the course of the entire movement, keeps in progress the process of fermentation and finally again comes to the top.

Class Fluidity

A third peculiarity that American Marxists had to reckon with (and with its ideological survivals of "cultural lag" we still have to reckon today) is the lack of class fixity which differentiated America from Europe throughout the nineteenth century. As a result, Marx pointed out, the republic, which in Europe in 1848 was a revolutionary goal, could exist in America in "its conservative form." And in the same passage he adds:

. . . in the United States of America . . . true enough, the classes already exist, but have not yet acquired permanent character, are in constant flux and reflux, constantly changing their elements and yielding them up to one another; . . . the

modern means of production instead of coinciding with a stagnant population, rather compensate for the relative scarcity of heads and hands; and, finally . . . the feverishly youthful life of material production, which has to appropriate a new world to itself, has so far left neither time nor opportunity to abolish the illusions of old. (*Eighteenth Brumaire,* Kerr & Co., pp. 21-2.)

As a consequence of this class fluidity which drained the working class of its most energetic elements and promoted illusions that the problems of the class could be solved by escape from it, the formation of the working class as a class in an ideological and political sense was enormously retarded. The promotion of such formation, separation from the twin parties of capitalism and the organization of the workers into a general labor political movement of their own—this Marx and Engels regarded as the main task of American Marxists. It is still the main task today.

As soon as there was a national working class movement independent of the Germans, my standpoint was clearly indicated by the facts in the case. That great national movement, no matter what its form, is the real starting point of American working class development. If the Germans join in, in order to help it or to hasten its development in the right direction, they may do a great deal of good and play a decisive part in it. If they stand aloof, they will dwindle down into a dogmatic sect and will be brushed aside as people who do not understand their own principles. (Engels in 1887 in a letter to Florence Kelley.)

The Need for a Labor Party

The first great step, which is of primary importance in every country first entering the movement, is always the constitution of the workers as an independent political party, no matter of what kind, so long as it is only a distinct workers' party. . . . (Letter of Engels to Sorge, Nov. 29, 1886.)

On the continent (in most countries) of Europe, the Socialist movement developed as a mass movement prior to the con-

solidation of the trade-unions, and the unions began with a socialist philosophy. In America (as in England) for historical reasons, the unions developed first, while the Socialist movements were impotent sects or non-existent. Therefore the unions developed on the basis of bourgeois ideology and the subordination of the working class to capitalist politics. Hence Marx and Engels emphasized the need for a mass labor party, "no matter what its first form" as the "real starting point of American working class development."

The most important thing was not the clarity of program, but the "constitution of an earnest workingmen's party" (Marx). Out of this beginning and the experiences of such a movement, out of its very blunders, would come clarity, provided only that the movement would be permanent, remain broad and inclusive, and that the Communists would not be too sectarian to work within it. How Engels conceived this process of clarification and the duties of the Marxists in connection with it, he explained in illuminating detail in a letter to Florence Kelley (dated Dec. 28, 1886):

It is far more important that the movement should spread, proceed harmoniously, take root and embrace as much as possible the whole American proletariat, than that it should start and proceed from the beginning on theoretically perfectly correct lines. There is no better road to theoretical clearness of comprehension than to learn by one's own mistakes. . . . And for a whole large class, there is no other road, especially for a nation so eminently practical and so contemptuous of theory as the Americans. The great thing is to get the working class to move as a class; that once obtained, they will soon find the right direction and all who resist . . . will be left out in the cold with small sects of their own. Therefore I think also the Knights of Labor a most important factor in the movement which ought not be pooh-poohed from without but to be revolutionized from within, and I consider that many of the Germans then have made a grievous mistake when they tried, in the face of a mighty and glorious movement not of their own creation, to make of their imported and not always understood theory a kind of *alleinseligmachendes* dogma and to keep aloof from any movement which did not

accept that dogma. Our theory is not a dogma but the exposition of a process of evolution, and that process involves successive phases. To expect that the Americans will start with the full consciousness of theory worked out in older industrial countries is to expect the impossible. What the Germans ought to do is to act up to their own theory—if they understand it, as we did in 1845 and 1848—to go in for any real general working class movement, accept its *faktischen* starting point as such and work it gradually up to the theoretical level by pointing out how every mistake made, every reverse suffered, was a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical orders in the original program. . . .

But above all, give the movement time to consolidate; do not make the inevitable confusion of the first start worse confounded by forcing down people's throats things which, at present, they cannot properly understand but which they soon will learn. A million or two workingmen's votes next November for a bona fide workingmen's party, is worth infinitely more at present than a hundred thousand votes for a doctrinally perfect program. The very first attempt, soon to be made if the movement progresses, to consolidate the moving masses on a national scale, will bring them all face to face, Georgites, K. of L., Trade-Unionists, and all . . . then will be the time for them to criticize the views of the others and thus, by showing up the inconsistencies of the various standpoints, to bring them gradually to understand their own actual position, the position made for them by the correlation of capital and wage labor. But anything that might delay or prevent that national consolidation of the workingmen's party —on no matter what platform—I should consider a great mistake. . . .

Engels never wearied of repeating this theme. In 1887, after much bitterness had been engendered by the shameful attitude of the A. F. of L., Knights of Labor, and Henry George movements toward the Haymarket martyrs, Engels still supported Aveling (Marx's son-in-law) against the sectarian tactics of the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Labor Party:

I think all our practice has shown that it is possible to

work along with the general movement of the working class at every one of its stages without giving up or hiding our own distinct position and even organization. (Letter to Florence Kelley, Jan. 27, 1887.)

And in his pamphlet on the American labor movement Engels wrote:

. . . the unification of the various independent bodies into one national Labor Army, with no matter how inadequate a provisional platform, provided it be truly a working class platform—that is the next great step to be accomplished in America. (*The Labor Movement in America,* published in 1887, reprinted in *Workers Age,* April 9 and April 16, 1932.)

With withering scorn Engels condemned the sectarianism of the American "Marxists" who "do not understand their own theory."

In spite of all, the masses can only be set in motion in a way suitable to the respective countries and adapted to the prevailing conditions—and this is usually a roundabout way. But everything else is of minor importance if only they are really aroused. (Letter to Sorge, Sept. 16, 1887.)

This breath of living Marxism contrasts strangely with the official outcries against "exceptionalism" today and with the sectarian tactical conception that what is desirable is a maximum program with minimum masses in motion, whereas Marx and Engels demanded a minimum program with maximum masses in motion.

Engels seems to be talking of the last four years of dogmatic "correctness," and sectarian impotence of the official Communist Party today, when he writes:

It proves how useless is a platform—for the most part theoretically correct—if it is unable to get into contact with the actual needs of the people. (Letter to Sorge, April 8, 1891.)

Sects, warned Marx, though necessary till some mass

movement appears, may become a hindrance to further development of such a movement and thus a reactionary force.

The development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real labor movement are always in inverse ratio to each other. As long as sects are justified (historically) the working class is still unripe for an independent historical movement. As soon as it attains to that ripeness all sects are essentially reactionary. (Letter of Marx to Bolte, Nov. 23, 1871.)

Marxists can make their superior theoretical knowledge of use to the backward labor movement, only if they are inside of it:

. . . with trade-unions and such like, must be the beginning, if there is to be a mass movement, and every step forward must be forced upon them by a defeat. But, after the first step beyond the bourgeois viewpoint has been made, things will move faster, just like everything in America . . . and then the foreign element in the nation will make its influence felt by its greater mobility. (Letter of Engels to Sorge, Feb. 8, 1890.)

Engels sums up his and Marx's conception on the danger of sectarianism in a letter to Florence Kelley, Jan. 27, 1887:

The movement in America, just at this moment, is I believe best seen from across the ocean. On the spot personal bickerings and local disputes must obscure much of the grandeur of it. And the only thing that could really delay its march would be the consolidation of these differences into established sects. To some extent, that will be unavoidable, but the less of it, the better. . . .

Our theory is a theory of development, not of dogma to be learned by heart and repeated mechanically. The less it is hammered into the Americans from the outside and the more they test it through their own experience, the more it will become part of their flesh and blood. . . .

Perspective: America's International Rôle

Towards the close of Engels' life he sensed a change in the

world situation and a change in America's position—consequences of the epoch of imperialism, and world wars about to burst as the final stage of capitalism and the fearful signs of its death agony. As early as 1890, Engels, armed with the weapon of historical materialism, was enabled to foresee the coming developments, trace the very groupings of the coming world war, which, a quarter century later, still took non-Marxist historians, liberals and opportunist Socialists by surprise!

In an article *On the Foreign Policy of Russian Czarism* (*Neue Zeit,* Vol. 8, p. 145 and 193), Engels wrote that the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and the Russian drive for Constantinople were creating groupings which would convert Europe into two great military encampments, make Russia into an ally of France against Germany and drive Austria, and perhaps Italy, into an alliance with Germany. "Both camps are preparing for a decisive struggle, for a war such as the world has never seen, where ten to fifteen million armed warriors face each other." The chief guarantee against such a war would be a revolution in Russia (Engels' sensitivity to revolutionary situations made him feel the first faint breeze of the coming storms of 1905 and 1917). "The fall of the Czarist autocracy in Russia would, however, directly accelerate this process." (Revolution in the rest of Europe, especially Germany.) At the same time, the revolutionary situation in Russia was transferring the center of reaction also to the republics and limited monarchies of Europe, and "perhaps they would be capable of marching their armies into Russia, to restore the authority of the Czar—what irony of world history!" And what prophetic sense!

In 1891 Engels warned the German working class of its revolutionary duty in the coming world war. But as early as Jan. 7, 1888 he had written to Sorge in America what the probable effects of such a European war would be upon America's world position:

If the war would be fought to a finish without inner movements (revolution in Russia or Germany in particular—

B.D.W.), a state of exhaustion would result such as Europe has not experienced for two hundred years. American industry would then win all along the line. . . .

What would the effect of this world hegemony be upon the retarded and painfully slow development of the American working class? Would America's hegemony be as complete or last as long as had England's in the preceding epoch? Would it corrupt and bourgeoisify the American working class for as long and to the extent that it had the British so that Engels had been moved to say that there would be no socialism in Great Britain worthy of the name until Britain lost her hegemony to Germany or America? To these questions Engels answered in the negative:

America will destroy England's industrial monopoly—as much as is left of it—but America cannot itself enter into possession of the heritage of this monopoly. And if no one land alone possesses the monopoly of the markets of the world, at least in the decisive branches of trade, then the —relatively favorable—conditions which existed in England from 1848 to 1870 cannot be reproduced anywhere, and even in America the conditions of the working class must sink progressively lower and lower. For when three countries (let us say: England, America and Germany) compete with each other under comparatively equal conditions for the possession of the world market, then there is no way out but chronic overproduction, since any one of the three countries is capable of meeting the entire demand. Therefore I contemplate development of the present crisis with greater interest than ever, and therefore I believe it will announce an epoch in the spiritual and political history of the American and English working classes—whose assistance is as necessary as it is desirable. (Letter to Florence Kelley, Feb. 3, 1886.)

Again Engels is a little premature as to the tempo of development, but brilliant in the accuracy of his forecast. What an admirable picture the above furnishes of the postwar period and the main political-economic features of the present crisis! "Whose assistance is as necessary as it is desirable," wrote

Engels in the letter quoted above. He was beginning to foresee the international rôle that America was destined to assume and the international rôle that history was assigning to the American working class:

What the breakdown of Russian czarism (how the prophecies are linked!—B.D.W.) would be for the great military monarchs of Europe—the snapping of their mainstay—that is for the bourgeoisie of the whole world the breaking out of class war in America. For America after all was the ideal of all the bourgeoisie: a country rich, vast, expanding, with purely bourgeois institutions unleavened by feudal remnants or monarchical traditions and without a permanent and hereditary proletariat. Here every one would become, if not a capitalist, at all events an independent man, producing or trading, with his own means, for his own account. And because there were not, as yet, classes with opposing interests, our—and your—bourgeois thought that America stood above class antagonisms and struggles. The delusion has now broken down, the last bourgeois Paradise on earth is fast changing into a Purgatorio, and can only be prevented from becoming like Europe, an Inferno, by the go-ahead pace at which the development of the newly-fledged proletariat of America will take place. (Letter to Florence Kelley, June 3, 1886.)

Such is the analysis, such is the rôle, which the founders of scientific Socialism assigned, which history itself has assigned to the American working class. The predictions of Marx and Engels, although with retarded tempo, have all been verified. Industrialization has indeed taken place "with seven-league boots"; slavery has been abolished; class fluidity has come to an end; the frontier has disappeared; the split between skilled and unskilled, native and foreign, negro and white, is yielding to growing homogeneity; America has ceased to be the "promised land" for the immigrant; negroes and working farmers are being radicalized and developing a feeling for the need of alliance with the workers against the "associated oligarchy of capital"; the Pacific has come to play its prophesied rôle; America has attained to stormy and contested world hegemony,

and a permanent working class has been formed. All the objective conditions are present for the American working class to achieve its historic destiny. Only the subjective factors are still lagging: first, "the constitution of an earnest workers' party" in the sense of a labor party and union movement "of practically the whole class of American wage workers"; and, second, the development in its midst, of a "nucleus" of "theoretically clear fighters," free from sectarianism and opportunism, who know how to analyze the problems facing the American working class, how "to accept its actual starting point" and "work along with the general movement of the working class at every one of its stages without giving up or hiding their own distinct position and organization," who "understand their own principles" and know how to "use their theory as a lever to set the American masses in motion"—in short a Marxist Communist Party worthy of the name. To create these subjective conditions the absorption of the writings of Marx and Engels on America, the developing of their fragmentary hints (fragments of a gigantic structure), the mastery of their method, are an essential aid. Their writings seem strangely fresh today because the suggestions they offered have not yet been accepted, the problems they analyzed have not yet been solved. Marxists in America can make no more fitting observation of the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Marx than by possessing themselves of that revolutionary heritage and making it their own—their own, and the heritage of the American working class as a whole.

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